

Addressing Long-Term Perspectives on the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Jordan is one of those countries experiencing economic and political pressures due to the massive refugee influx as a result of the Syrian Civil War, which started in 2011. This has dramatically increased Jordan's population size and strained its resources.

Syria's neighbors opened their borders to refugees expecting that the conflict would soon end and that the massive population increases would be temporary. However, the Syrian conflict shows no signs of an end, and large returns will not happen anytime soon. Therefore, Jordan, Syria's other neighboring countries and the international community has to be prepared for long-term perspectives.

On 16 March 2015, KAS Jordan Office organized in collaboration with the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy (JID) a roundtable discussion on "Addressing Long-Term Perspectives on the Syrian Refugee Crisis". The roundtable was conducted under Chatham House Rule. It gathered participants from NGOs, INGOs, UN-agencies, Civil Society Organizations, Government, media embassies and academics.

The main objective of the roundtable discussion was to allow participants of diverse professional backgrounds, expertise and policy experience to share their perspectives on the challenges Jordan faces due to the Syrian refugee crisis and on how Jordan and the international community should jointly encourage long-term development.

The roundtable discussion was structured around 3 sessions: the first session provided an overview about the current regional situation vis-à-vis the refugee crisis. The second session featured a country perspective of Syria's neighboring countries, which

provided to bring additional perspectives from Turkey and Lebanon. The third session was dedicated to a discussion on the future of the crisis and burden sharing. Speakers from different organizations, the government and academics respectively gave a short input to each session which was discussed afterwards with the participants.

In the first session, an overview of the regional situation in time of the Syrian crisis was given from the view of the international community. With regard to the number of refugees per country throughout the region, the speaker said that Turkey and Lebanon host the largest number of Syrian refugees followed by Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. The situation has had a dramatic effect on Iraq already plagued by a displacement crisis with up to 2.2 million internally displaced persons and some 220,000 throughout the region. The speaker recognized that the main challenge that the international community is facing relates to the issue of sustainability of response to the Syrian refugee crisis: "To what extent can we continue providing the type of assistance that we have been providing so far, given the likelihood that there will be donor fatigue, host community fatigue, threats to social cohesion between the host communities and refugees. How can we maintain the momentum of response?" one of the speakers asked. Another major challenge was mentioned, which is the fact that there is no clear path to any durable solutions. The traditional approach to dealing with the refugee crisis is to look at three durable solutions: local integration, voluntary repatriation and resettlement. However, a point was made that solutions are challenged by a number of difficulties. First, local integration is a very sensitive issue in the MENA region and is not something that is being looked

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out or proposed. Voluntary repatriation is very closely linked to finding a political solution, but as long as that is not in progress, it is difficult to start considering voluntary repatriation. Safety and dignity are rudimentary, and refugees need to have confidence in their prospects upon their return. Concerning the option of resettlement to a third country, which is usually a western country, it can accommodate as few as 2% of the refugee population all over the world. Emphasis was put on the role of humanitarian organizations in the Syrian Crisis. "Although political issues cannot be solved by humanitarian aid, the humanitarian intervention is meant to help refugees to sustain and maintain their dignity in such a multifaceted crisis", a speaker said.

The second session of the day put the spotlight on Syria's neighboring countries – Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Representatives spoke to the audience each on behalf of their country. Concerning Jordan, the strong efforts Jordanians have made since the beginning of the crisis, opening their borders to their Syrian neighbors, were mentioned. Jordan thought that the crisis would have a soon end, but now the government has to face the fact that the situation has only gotten worse. Almost 1.4 million refugees entered Jordan. There are different camps for the Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, only 20% of the refugees live in those camps. Almost 52% of the refugees are below 18 of whom many are competing with Jordanians on local job opportunities. This is just one example of the many burdens placed on the Jordanian Government. Current figures suggest that the share of responsibility towards the refugees is carried unequally between Jordan, with 47%, and the international community, with 43%. Various impacts in the field of education, health, labor and security were mentioned by the Jordanian speaker and the international community was urged to give more support to Jordan. The second speaker, coming from Turkey, was able to provide the attendants with the representation of a very unique position in the conflict. In addition to the issues that are well known among Lebanese and Jor-

dansians, Turkey additionally has to deal with conflicts coming from language and culture barriers. It was mentioned how these differences between the societies happen to lead to resentment towards the 2 million (an estimate, since only 1,6 million are actually registered) Syrian refugees. These differences become especially apparent, considering that 85% of the immigrants live outside of refugee camps, either in border cities or major cities like Istanbul. When the first Syrians came to Turkey, they were not considered refugees but had a guest status, which over the time changed into the legal status of temporary protection. The presence of these refugees affects Turkey in different ways. Socially, 40,000 children have already been born on Turkish territories since the beginning of the crisis. This has an impact on Turkey's demographics just as much as the many marriages that have been officiated. In fact, the speaker believes this would help the integration process, since these children, being born into Turkish society, will consider Turkey as their home country. However, he holds an especially negative view on the ghettos that form in urban areas, populated by Syrians. When looking at the economic situation, one can see the negative side of Syrians immigrating, such as increasing inflation and job competition. Also, it is to mention that Turkey received only US\$200 million from the international community, while it spent US\$5 billion on the Syrian refugees, he said. On the other hand, the Syrians filled a labor supply gap in Turkey, and some of them even act as investors in small businesses through which they contribute to the Turkish economy. Still one cannot overlook the security issues that Syrian refugees bring along. According to the speaker, the Turkish society feels vulnerable to terrorist attacks and developed a fear of the local Syrians. In the end, he does believe though, that the presence of Syrian refugees is Turkey's new reality and that it should be admitted that they are not going back.

The third speaker talked on behalf of Lebanon, bordering Syria in its south west. He considers the Syrian crisis a national problem first of all and could also look at it as

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an Arab problem, but does not believe that UN-agencies can solve all of the problems of the region, in light of each country's unique national interest.

The last session "The Future of the Crisis and Burden Sharing" was opened from a perspective of a humanitarian worker. The speaker believes that humanitarian workers have the responsibility to care for the people, while it should be politicians who solve the crisis eventually. The second speaker from the Jordanian government believes that the main problem of the region is indeed the Israeli-Palestinian problem, not the Syrian issue itself. She sees a problem in UN coordination as they sometimes seem not to work fast enough and to involve people who do not know who to approach concerning certain issues. Stressing the unique situation of Jordan in the region, she said Jordan needed to remain a stable place for refugees and that the international community is much needed for this to work. Eventually though, she said, the Jordanian government has a responsibility to take care of its people, even if that meant that refugee help were needed to be decreased. The speaker called Jordan a "safe haven" of the Middle East, a position he stressed needs to be sustained

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Mobilizing local, national and regional grassroots' support;
 - Working sustainably towards a solution for each separately affected country;
 - In response to the high numbers of refugees, Jordan's policy does not only have to put its focus on the refugees themselves, but also on their hosts, which requires the society's capacity must be built up;
 - Political solutions must be devised to end the crisis;
 - Sustainable solutions must be found, e.g. an establishment of a Ministry of Human Affairs, as suggested some years ago by the Arab League to better utilize the available resources, to avoid duplication and to reduce overhead costs. Under such a Ministry, INGOs, UN-agencies and Humanitarian Organizations could work together in a more sustainable way;
 - The issue of a safe zone inside Syria should be studied and discussed;
 - More support should be pledged by the international community, especially for the improvement of the infrastructure;
 - More coordination among the different organizations should be made to avoid project redundancy.
- The international response needs to be stepped up to meet the worrying demands of the crisis;
 - The aid infrastructure of aid agencies needs to change since aid benefits do not apply to about 80 to 85% of refugees who live outside of the camps;
 - The voices of refugees, host communities and internally displaced persons must be listened to. Working towards empowering these individuals to be their own advocates and to take charge of their own lives and to develop their skills are essential;